

*This article is not about scientific research, it's about lived experiences and solutions to problems. I state several of my own experiences in order to validate people who have had similar experiences, and I discuss several of my ideas for solutions. I only use the word "we" if I fall into the group of people I am talking about or the factor(s) which define that group (e.g. sensory processing differences) also apply to me.*

The root of all human social and behavioral differences begins in the brain.

This means that in many cases, neurodivergent people naturally will not conform to what is perceived as typical<sup>1</sup>. It follows that neurodivergent people experience increased hardship in interactions with other people and greater society because of their natural brain type. However, it also follows that, if they are nurtured and grown in the company of like-(or perhaps unlike-)brained people who validate them, they can develop a separate culture of their own, one in which they experience feelings of validation rather than exclusion and separation.

While non-typical brain types such as autism and ADHD are usually no longer seen as "bad", outward expressions of them, such as an autistic child's repetitive playing style, an ADHD person's hyperfocusing on a particular subject, or a person with sensory difficulties' objection to various forms of input, often are. It's very important to make that distinction. With that in mind, I will share with you some of the things that have happened to me as a result of who I naturally am.

As an autistic person, I have experienced a great degree of psychological and emotional separation from the world around me, despite having lived in it and interacted with it physically my entire life. To use an idiomatic expression, it felt as though I was "physically in this world, but not of it."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, I and doubtless other people have experienced the emotional equivalent of *taxation without representation*.

Why is this? From my perspective and the perspective of others who have faced this great tribulation, we are emotionally and psychologically taxed with having to follow a set of rules and societal norms. We are taxed with the expectation of fitting into a certain understanding of "normal", without receiving the benefits of acceptance, friends, and an internal sense of success and thriving-all forms of representation in society. Yes, we may be *functioning*, but that doesn't mean we're *thriving*. We're hurting, even if we don't say it out loud.

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<sup>1</sup> A note on neurotypicality and neurodivergence: All people's brains are naturally different, but the majority of human brains exist primarily in a range of what is considered typical. A good portion (some say up to 30 percent) of human brains largely or primarily operate in ways that are not considered typical.

<sup>2</sup> A note on autistic people using figurative language: Whatever your brain type, language is learned through repetition and imitation. As a child, one of my favorite books was a book of idioms. Through imitation, reading, and hearing other people speak, I have picked up and learned many of the nuances of "typical" speech-and I liked many of them.

As a person with sensory processing difficulties, navigating mainstream society's size, commotion, and often excessive speed is too much for me. Mainstream society feels big and overwhelming and I have very little real connection to it, and most people from the mainstream or neurotypical perspective would not or do not understand me. I would not be capable of thriving, being happy, or enjoying myself in that environment.

Moreover, many neurodivergent people have either been trained or have subconsciously trained themselves to "act normally." Why? This is because of the belief that neurodivergent people will have an easier or more successful life if they "act more normally." Though externally the life of a person of neurodivergence may look pleasant, internally, people to whom this is done are suffering. If you asked them, they would respond by saying that they are hurting, and how can a person be hurting and truly successful at the same time?

Moreover, I realized that the notion that neurotypical behavior, mannerisms, and self-expression are "right" and that others "need to be fixed" is itself a form of ableism-the belief that some people are superior to others based on physical or mental ability. My autistic traits and behaviors, likes, dislikes, and interests are not "bad", "weird", or "problematic", and neither are those associated with my sensory processing difficulties and differences. Quite to the contrary, they are essential to my identity. If that's not enough, holding ableist beliefs is flat out *wrong*. Ableism hurts people. Neurodivergent people *must* be accepted precisely as they are.

Imagine being born into a world where you didn't know why other kids picked on you and played with you in ways that made you uncomfortable, why you couldn't make friends, why you couldn't understand social cues and didn't even know they existed, where you felt a profound degree of separation from society at large, where others did not understand you and dismissed your legitimate complaints as nonsense. A world where you saw yourself as normal, healthy, and beautiful, but others saw many of your behaviors as weird, bad, or even pathological. Imagine being born into and growing up surrounded by people who did not speak your language. While this does not happen in reality, the reality is that I was born into and grew up in a world of people whose brains did not work the way mine did.

This is my experience and the experience of countless other autistic and neurodivergent individuals.

Now, I sometimes fear that I have lost my autistic-ness and become too typical for my own good. I worry that I have forgotten my original self, and that the damage has already been done.

Elaborating on that last point, I think back to when I initially discovered that I am autistic. As I thought about the consequences of this enormous discovery, it dawned on me that I can be a happy and fully authentic autistic person who does not hide a single one of their natural neurodivergent traits, or be a fake and extremely hurt neurotypical shell that changes its behavior to fit into society while remaining unaccepted for who they are.

As long as autistic and neurodivergent people have to conform to a society they cannot rationally deconstruct or emotionally relate to in the form of friendships, we will always feel sad

and feel bad. If we keep having to be under pressure to follow typical routes of so-called success, we will ultimately fail.

We live in a society which has forgotten that people are naturally different. We are all normal, yet we are all different.

Naturally, one asks, as I have multiple times, “Is there any hope?” To which the answer comes back in no unclear terms “Yes, there is hope.” However, this statement only applies if we are willing to create a place where hope-and thus ourselves as human beings-can be nurtured. This is why people of neurodivergence need an alternative, another option, another way of being, perhaps even a counterculture, as some might have it.

As I envision it, this solution will be a place for people of neurodivergence to find, grow, and explore their identities outside of mainstream society and conventional paradigms of thought. This solution will be a place where neurodivergent people will not have to mask their innate and beautiful traits of thought, word, and action, but can express them to the fullest degree in the company of people who do not judge, mock, or un-necessarily restrain. This solution will be a place where people with sensory processing difficulties will not have to experience people touching them from behind their back, pinecones, and loud, sudden, and scary noises-all of which scared and hurt me since I was a small child. This solution will be a place where neurodivergent people can discuss ideas for artistic projects and make art and works of creativity, support each other when needed, and help each other out.

As someone who is a young person as of this writing, I think especially but not exclusively of youth and young adults in their struggle to identify with other people while being who they want to be. To that point, I envision my solution as being a place where teenagers and young adults can find a transitional phase between the world of their parents/family and the real world. This transitional place will be the world of their friends and their very own youth-created and youth-based subculture-a place I largely did not have throughout significant portions of my teenagehood.

This solution will be a place where teenagers and young people, especially but not exclusively neurodivergent ones, while they are still developing, will be able to grow surrounded by friends and people and things that they like and choose-rather than overstimulation and the feeling of not being able to express one’s non-mainstreamness and nonconformity. This solution will indeed be a community-but a community of individuality.

I conclude with an earnest plea to all neurodivergent individuals: stop suffering in silence.

*This article is the first part of my upcoming manifesto, in which this discussion will be continued.*